

NAHUM

Part 1: “The Righteous Wrath of God”

Nahum 1:1–14

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Scripture Reading

“An oracle concerning Nineveh. The book of the vision of Nahum of Elkosh. The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty. His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it. Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him. The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him. But with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness. What do you plot against the LORD? He will make a complete end; trouble will not rise up a second time. For they are like entangled thorns, like drunkards as they drink; they are consumed like stubble fully dried. From you came one who plotted evil against the LORD, a worthless counselor. Thus says the LORD, ‘Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away. Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. And now I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds apart.’ The LORD has given commandment about you: ‘No more shall your name be perpetuated; from the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image and the metal image. I will make your grave, for you are vile’” (Nahum 1:1–14, ESV).

Introduction

Today, we are beginning a journey through the Old Testament book of Nahum.

Now, I am fully aware that many of you have likely never read Nahum. Some of you perhaps did not know there was a book in the Bible named Nahum. And I am almost certain none of you have ever heard this book taught before.

In fact, according to the statistics provided by biblegateway.com, Nahum is the second least-read book of the entire Bible. (If you are wondering who got first place, that distinction belongs to Obadiah).

And admittedly, Nahum is a hard book to read and study at first glance. It is a book that is actively avoided and under-taught in the American church. Some would say choosing to preach through the book of Nahum might be the exact opposite of a church-growth strategy!

However, the book of Nahum is a part of the canon of the divinely inspired words of God. Like all of Scripture, the book of Nahum is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training (cf. 2 Tim 3:16). And I want to contend that the book of Nahum has the capacity to illuminate blind-spots in our spiritual imaginations in this particular cultural moment.

In fact, the book of Nahum is often filled with ideas, doctrines, and themes that American Christianity tends to minimize and ignore. Nahum talks about wrath and rage, death and doom, eternal judgment and prophetic oracles of woe. Just listing Nahum's themes sounds like listing the tracks off a death metal album, right?

But it would be wrong to dismiss Nahum as nothing more than a book about hellfire and brimstone. With his words, the prophet Nahum paints a picture filled with terror and horror, but beyond the macabre, he is pointing the people of God toward a vision of glorious hope.

A few weeks ago, we concluded a sermon series on the Old Testament book of Jonah. Jonah is all about God's mercy and salvation upon his enemies. The book of Jonah ends with God relenting from the judgment he had promised against the ancient city of Nineveh. So, at first glance, the book of Nahum seems to be the exact inverse and opposite of all that we learned in Jonah. Jonah was about Nineveh's salvation. Nahum is about Nineveh's destruction. Is the Bible contradicting itself here, or is there something more happening in the tension between these two books?

I want to argue that Jonah and Nahum *do not* contradict one another. In fact, these two books are meant to be understood in light of one another. Jonah tells us about God's heart of mercy for this world. But Nahum shows us a vision of God's judgment upon this world. And when we understand the tension between these two books, we will come to a deeper understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Today, Nahum chapter 1 will show us a crucial facet of the gospel that many American Christians are prone to miss, and that is **"The Righteous Wrath of God."**

We will explore the righteous wrath of God from three angles: **1.) The Character of God's Wrath, 2.) The Power of God's Wrath, and 3.) The Refuge of God's Wrath.**

Exposition

1) The Character of God's Wrath

Now, to give you a little historical context, the book of Nahum was written around one hundred years after the events of the book of Jonah. At the end of Jonah, the city of Nineveh turns away from its evil and turns towards God in repentance and prayer. As a result, God has mercy upon this city of his enemies; a city whose evil deeds had provoked divine judgment of death and destruction.

But by the time of Nahum's life, a century has passed. The repentant Ninevites of Jonah's lifetime have all died, and a new generation has arisen to take their place. And tragically, this new generation of Ninevites has returned to the cruel ways of Nineveh's past. The people of Nineveh have again embraced the same idolatry and injustice that initially incited the anger of God.

Nineveh, after all, is the capital city of Assyria. During the time of Jonah, Assyria was on its way to becoming the most powerful nation in the ancient Near East [show [1Map of Assyrian Empire](#)]. Now, during the time of Nahum, Assyria has become the world's first true empire; an empire that rose to power through conquest and cruelty.

Around this time in the Old Testament era, the people of God had divided into two kingdoms [show [2The Divided Kingdom](#)]. The kingdom of Israel was in the north, and the kingdom of Judah was in the south. But in the year 722 B.C., Assyria brutally destroys the northern kingdom of Israel. Thousands of Israelites are murdered by the Assyrians. Many more are deported far away from their homeland and forced into hard labor.

Now the kingdom of Judah is next on Assyria's warpath. The destruction of Judah at the hands of Assyria seems inevitable.

But God gives a man named "Nahum of Elkosh" a "vision" (וִיזוֹן)(Nah 1:1). And in that vision, Nahum sees the anger of God burning hot against Assyria for their cruelty and brutality against his people. The prophet cries out, "*The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies* (Nah 1:2)."

Here, Nahum isn't just showing us that the Lord is angry. He is showing how and why he is angry. He is showing us the *character* God's anger. And the first thing we learn is that God's anger is a "jealous" anger.

Now, years ago, Oprah Winfrey famously stated that she refused to believe in a jealous God. Her reasoning was that if God was all-knowing and all-powerful, why did he need to be jealous of her?

But Oprah was mistaken about the nature of jealousy. Sure, some types of jealousy are wrong, like a child being jealous of his or her sibling's toy or the envy that comes from comparing our wealth or beauty with another person.

However, there is such a thing as a righteous jealousy. There is a righteous jealousy that says, “I have promised to be faithful to my wife and she has promised to be faithful to me, and we will jealously stand against anything that would compromise the integrity of our marriage.” There is a righteous jealousy that says, “I love my children too much to allow them to choose friends or habits that will harm them.” And it is this jealousy type that fuels God’s wrath.

God is not jealous *of* his people—he is jealous *for* his people. It is a righteous jealousy, a protective jealousy, and a jealousy that tolerates no rivals.

So when a rival kingdom—like Assyria or any other kingdom of this world—lays claim to the hearts, minds, and bodies of his people, it is right for God’s anger to rise in opposition.

But admittedly, God’s judgment doesn’t always happen according to our preferences and timelines. Do you remember the way Jonah complained against God after God showed mercy to the people of Nineveh?

When God relented, Jonah said, “God, I knew you would do something like this. I knew you were a gracious and merciful God. I knew that you were *slow to anger*” (cf. Jon 4:2).

But the prophet Jonah’s complaint will now become the prophet Nahum’s praise. Nahum declares, “*The LORD is slow to anger and great in power, and the LORD will by no means clear the guilty...*” (Nah 1:3a).

Jonah wanted God’s anger to be immediate and reactionary. He wanted quick satisfaction and relief from his fear and resentment.

But Nahum sees something more. Nahum knows that, in his patience, God’s kindness is meant to lead us to repentance (cf. Rom 2:4). He knows that God’s slowness to anger means the perfection of justice.

Nahum trusts that God’s judgment is coming. And he rejoices that God’s judgment is not arbitrary or reactionary. God’s judgment is perfect in power, perfect in wisdom, and perfect in righteousness.

Nahum sees more than God’s wrath. He sees the *righteousness* of God’s wrath. And he trusts the righteousness of God’s wrath.

The righteous wrath of God is the truth that liberates us from the need to avenge ourselves for the wrongs that have been done against us. Trusting in the righteous wrath of God means that because our Lord is perfect in wisdom, justice, and power, we rest in the knowledge he is the only one who will be able to be our vengeance and vindication. We no longer need to harbor bitterness against those who have wronged us. We no longer need to drink the poison of unforgiveness. We can be liberated to truly love our enemies while knowing that God will bring forth our justice.

As the Apostle Paul writes in the book of Romans, “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Rom 12:17–19).

2) The Power of God’s Wrath

There is a moment in the film *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* when the heroes are traveling through the deep waters of a planet's core. They are warned that terrible monsters lie within the deeps, but their mission cannot be delayed. As they delve into the darkness, a massive fish comes behind them and attacks them. The beast is so gargantuan that it seems like it will soon swallow their vessel whole. But just as the Jedi Knights are about to meet their doom, a far, far greater beast emerges from the darkness and eats the fish the viewer thought was so massive. In that moment [show 3Bigger Fish], the Jedi master wryly remarks, “There’s always a bigger fish.”

The idea, of course, is that what once seemed like an indestructible threat can suddenly look much smaller when a far greater power is revealed.

If there is one historical detail you have to understand in order to understand the book of Nahum, it is this—the Assyrian empire seemed *invincible*. The ancient world had never seen a military force so massive, so aggressive, and so brutal.

The Assyrians would not only defeat their enemies in battle, it was their aim to utterly overwhelm and humiliate their enemies [show 4Assyrian Brutality]. If a city or nation resisted conquest, the Assyrians would gather up the surviving soldiers and chop off their limbs and castrate them. In one case, Assyrians decapitated every male of a defeated city and then made a stack of human heads outside of the conquered city that was as high as a tower.¹ They flayed and tortured those would challenge them, and brutally oppressed those who submitted to them.

The Assyrians believed that they were inherently superior, and, thus, it was their right to rule over all nations or else destroy them. Moreover, their bloodlust and will to power were religiously energized. The central god of Assyria was the god Ashur [show 5Ashur], who was considered to be the spiritual embodiment of the Assyrian empire. It was the will of Ashur to expand the dominion of Assyria over all surrounding nations. In fact, whenever Assyria conquered a new city or territory, the armies would capture the graven idols that represented the gods of the conquered people. They would then bring those idols back to the temple of their god Ashur and place those gods bowed down before the image of Ashur.

¹ Erika Belibtreu, “Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death,” *Biblical Archeology Society*, (January/February 1991), 5–6.

Now, to take a statue of another nation's god and lay it face-down in another nation's temple seems like an act of pure pettiness. But in the ancient world, it was an act of spiritual terror. The idea was if Ashur had the power to humble not only armies and nations but even gods, who has a chance of defeating such an invulnerable force?

Now, remember, the northern kingdom of Israel has been defeated. The kingdom of Judah is next in Assyria's warpath. This relatively small kingdom would have been quaking in fear, as the dark clouds of Assyrian invasion darken their horizon .

In this context, the defeat of Assyria not only seemed impossible—it seemed *unimaginable*.

But it is at this precise moment the prophet Nahum beholds a vision of the far greater power and the far greater glory of the Lord. And suddenly, the unimaginable becomes possible.

Nahum proclaims of his God, *“...His way is in whirlwind and storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebukes the sea and makes it dry; he dries up all the rivers; Bashan and Carmel wither; the bloom of Lebanon withers. The mountains quake before him; the hills melt; the earth heaves before him, the world and all who dwell in it”* (Nahum 1:3b–5).

“So yes,” Nahum says, “Assyria commands great armies, but the Lord commands the whirlwinds and the storm.”

All of creation answers to the Lord’s authority because he is the Creator! The clouds in the sky are like the dust of his feat. He commands the waters, and they obey him. Mountains melt, forests wilt, and the earth quakes before the presence of his glory.

This is not just any god. This is not a mere patron deity of a nation. The Nahum’s God and our God is the Lord of all heaven and earth!

Genesis 1 is on his resumé! He is the God who spoke light into the darkness, the one who commands that galaxies and of the cosmos, the one who alone is the author of life! There is not a single atom of the universe that is outside of his dominion!

He is the Great I Am—the one in whom we live and move and have our being! He is not contained or constrained by the categories of space or time or human understanding. His power is infinite, his goodness is perfect, his holiness is absolute, his glory is unmatched.

Even before an empire as mighty as Assyria, the Nahum asks, who is able to contend with this God: *“Who can stand before his indignation? Who can endure the heat of his anger? His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him”* (Nah 1:6).

The long story of human history is riddled with kings and kingdoms who have exalted themselves to a functional place of divinity. A charismatic leader will rise to power. A nation will grow in wealth and military might. And before you know it, the world begins to pay attention to the noise and pretensions of the kings and kingdoms of this world. The horizons of our imaginations are limited so that we can only see power in terms of this world.

But in such moments, it is the task of God's people to pay attention to the words of our Creator rather than the chaos of this world. It is our task to allow the words of Scripture to fill us with a sense of awe and wonder before the transcendent might of the living God.

And here, in Nahum chapter 1, the prophet is reminding us that there is no power that is greater than the power of our God.

The armies of Assyria will be cut down. The yoke of oppression and affliction against the people of God will be broken. The Assyrian empire will fall, and its idols will be destroyed. As our text reads: *"Thus says the LORD, 'Though they are at full strength and many, they will be cut down and pass away. Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no more. And now I will break his yoke from off you and will burst your bonds apart.' The LORD has given commandment about you: 'No more shall your name be perpetuated; from the house of your gods I will cut off the carved image and the metal image. I will make your grave, for you are vile'"* (Nah 1:12–14).

This is a God whose fierce wrath burns against all sin, all evil, and idols, whether they are out there in the world or within our hearts.

Such a God must not be trifled with or ignored.

It is good and right for the word of God to reawaken a sense of God's holiness and power. It is good and right to recover a sense of the fear of the Lord that the Bible says is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 9:10).

As the author of Hebrews tells us, *"Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire"* (Heb 12:28–29).

3) The Refuge of God's Wrath

The formative years of my childhood took place in the 1990s, which means that my expectations were forever malformed into believing that the Dallas Cowboys can and should be a team that wins Super Bowls.

For those of you who were not yet alive, believe it or not, there was a time when the Dallas Cowboys were, by far, the best team in the National Football League. In fact, in the mid-1990s, the Dallas Cowboys should have won four Super Bowls in a row, but that

achievement was largely thwarted by one man—Deion Sanders [show 6Sanders for San Fran].

Many football analysts would say Deion Sanders wasn't just good at football. He wasn't just worthy of the Hall of Fame. He was arguably the best cornerback to ever play the game. If you are not a football fan, a cornerback is a key defensive player that guards the wide receivers or the guys who go out for the big long passes.

And even though the Cowboys had one of the best quarterbacks in Troy Aikman and one of the best receivers in Michael Irvin, on January 14, 1995, Deion Sanders was a better cornerback [show 7Sanders v Irving]. Because of him, the Cowboys lost in the playoffs, and his team, the San Francisco 49ers, went on to win the Super Bowl that year.

Because of this, Deion Sanders was the first professional athlete that I remember *hating*. I couldn't stand the guy. I thought he was arrogant and cocky and terrible, and I wanted him to lose. But then, something happened that completely and utterly changed my opinion of Deion Sanders. The next year, he became a Dallas Cowboy [show 8Deion for Dallas].

And suddenly, I was like, “You know, I really like Deion Sanders. In fact, I think he’s pretty amazing, and I sure am glad that he is on my team.”

For almost the entirety of chapter 1 of Nahum, the prophet has been describing the absolute terror of God's wrath against Nineveh and against all who would oppose him. God's power is envisioned as a fearsome and unstoppable force. Nahum paints a picture of divine violence and destruction. But, interestingly, these images of judgment are not the primary message of Nahum chapter 1.

The Hebrew prophets often wrote within poetry, and in Hebrew poetry, the author will not say the most important idea at the beginning or the end of a section of Scripture. Rather, the most important idea—the most central idea—is intentionally in the exact middle of the passage.

And right in the middle of this passage, filled with a terrifying vision of God's wrath and might, verse 7 shines like a light of hope in the midst of darkness and destruction. Nahum declares, “*The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him*” (Nah 1:7).

Nahum is saying, now that I have helped you envision the immensity of God's terrifying power and might, now that you know the burning wrath and rage he feels towards sin and evil, I want you to know that this glorious truth—the Lord is good. And, today, if you are in Christ, he is for you!

He is omnipotent and invincible, and he is on your side. He plays for your team. He is good. And if this God is for you, who can be against you (cf. Rom 8:31)?

The prospect of God's absolute power can seem like a terrifying truth. But when we view God's absolute power in light of his absolute goodness, we have a reason for an absolute and undefeatable hope.

But you might say, “But what about my sin and selfishness? What about the evil and the idols of my own heart?”

The hard truth is our sin and selfishness do merit the judgment of God. Our evil and our idols deserve nothing less than the consuming fire of God’s wrath.

But God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). When we could not save ourselves, Jesus stepped down into our darkness, he took upon himself our punishment. God placed all of his divine wrath against sin upon his Son. And when Jesus rose again, he showed this world a power even greater than death.

Now, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (cf. Rom 8:1). If you trust in Jesus, you are no longer a child of wrath—you are a child of God! You are blessed! You are chosen! You are forgiven of your sins, and you are redeemed!

The righteous wrath of God no longer needs to be your fear—instead, it can be your *fortress*.

In the midst of his own trial and tribulations, the great protestant reformer Martin Luther wrote one of the most famous hymns that Christians continue to sing today. It is a song that reminds us that the power of evil is real, but that God's power is greater and in that power, we find a mighty fortress. The song goes:

“A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing.
Our Helper He, amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe.
His craft and pow’r are great, and, armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing,
Were not the right Man on our side, the Man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be? Christ Jesus, it is He!
The Lord of hosts His name, from age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.”²

Redeemer Christian Church, may we know and stand in awe before the righteous wrath of God. May we rejoice in the truth of God's power. And may we rest in the truth that he is good.

² Martin Luther, “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God,” Trans. Frederick Hedge. Public Domain: 1529.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Read Nahum 1:1–14. What is the big idea of this passage and what are the primary images that stick out to you when you read this chapter?
2. Have you ever read the book of Nahum before? If not, why do you think Nahum is one of the least-read books of the Bible?
3. How do you understand the apparent tension between the books of Jonah and Nahum? Do you think they contradict each other, or are they meant to be understood in light of one another? Why?
4. What does it mean that God's wrath is righteous? How is this different from the way that we might understand human anger or revenge?
5. How can we reconcile the image of God as loving and merciful with the idea of his wrath and punishment for sin?